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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 January 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Varieties of Political Violence in Latin America:
The Case of the Tupamaros in Uruguay

NOTE

This is written as a companion piece to the memo on violence in Ceylon. The materials on Uruguay and the Tupamaros are voluminous by any definition and lend themselves to a major research effort which would explore a variety of plausible and useful explanations of the onset of major violence in a formerly peaceful society. Admittedly, I have read only a fraction of the materials readily available and my particular emphasis on the importance of individual and group dynamics is only part of the story.

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1. One simple definition of political violence is the use of force and coercion by organized domestic groups to achieve their national political objectives. As so defined, political violence is virtually endemic in most Latin American countries. Not only do would-be revolutionaries on the periphery of the political spectrum resort to insurgency campaigns to destroy the established order, but elite groups close to the center of power also turn to coups and other coercive acts to preserve that order, protect their special interests, and cope with national problems.

2. Perhaps the most dramatic case of political violence in Latin America so far during the 1970s is the urban insurgency of the Tupamaros in Uruguay. The Tupamaros have repeatedly disrupted the traditional tranquility of the country through such actions as the kidnapping of foreign and local dignitaries, the robbing of banks, the bombing of foreign business enterprises, the theft of documents that reveal the corruption of domestic entrepreneurs, the murder of policemen, and the seizure of radio stations for the delivery of revolutionary lectures. Their challenge to the authority of the state was perhaps best seen during 1970-1971 by their ability to hold their victims in "people's prisons" for as long as they chose, and yet to arrange for massive jailbreaks of captured insurgents from government prisons. In despair of coping with the

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challenge solely through ordinary police action, the government has sponsored a campaign of "counterterrorism" to eliminate known insurgents and intimidate suspected supporters.

3. The Tupamaros have been in the field since 1963. Yet as recently as 1968, few observers (certainly not the present writer) took them to be a particularly potent guerrilla group, or thought Uruguay to be particularly susceptible to a major insurgency campaign in any case. True, Uruguay had suffered for years from a deteriorating economy and a rather feckless political leadership; but it still seemed blessed (by Latin American standards) with a remarkably open political system, a high standard of living, a basically homogenous and relatively complacent population, and a dearth of obvious social injustices. As in the past, there was always some prospect of a military coup to ease the way out of a governmental crisis, but terror and counterterror as a way of life seemed a world away.

4. Let's look again: *Who are the Tupamaros? What is behind their campaign of political violence? And why in Uruguay?* To put it simply, the Tupamaros are attempting to duplicate through urban terrorism that which Fidel Castro accomplished through guerrilla warfare in the mountainous countryside of Cuba in the late 1950s -- the forceful overthrow of the established political system.

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The formal name of the Uruguayan revolutionaries is the *Movement for National Liberation*. The founders, most prominently Raul Sendic, were originally connected with Uruguay's Socialist Party and other legally-constituted political groups on the far left. For a time in the early 1960s, they engaged in organizational work in the countryside to radicalize the sugar workers, one of the few downtrodden groups in the country. Then in 1963 -- discouraged by the poor returns for their electoral and union activities and influenced by Castro's insistence that Latin American revolutionaries make revolutions -- Sr. Sendic and company turned to a campaign of political violence. Their first inning as guerrillas came in July, with a successful raid on a provincial rifle club where they commandeered a dozen weapons. At the time, there were probably no more than a dozen or so active insurgents.

5. The leaders of the Tupamaros are mainly members of the intelligentsia and young professionals. The great majority of recruits over the years probably have come from the ranks of university students, but the movement has also attracted some members from all walks of life, including businessmen and bureaucrats, as well as sugar workers and other laborers, and perhaps some congenital outlaws and adventure-seekers. To some extent it appears

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to be a case of sons and daughters rebelling against their fathers, as many of the terrorists come from relatively advantaged and at times from prominent families. There is little reliable data on total membership, but from the style and frequency of Tupamaro raids, one could envisage (in December 1971) perhaps 500 or so terrorists, and at least an equal number of would-be adherents (mainly high school students) and part-time helpers. The Uruguayan population is approaching three million, so that the same rates of participation applied to the US population would produce a minimum of 75,000 terrorists and ardent supporters.

6. From the point of view of the leadership the name *Movement for National Liberation* is self-explanatory. They insist that Uruguay is controlled by a repressive oligarchy that rules in its own interests and in those of foreign businessmen and governments, especially the United States. The ruling groups ignore the true interests of nation and people, who therefore have to be liberated. The name *Tupamaro*, on the other hand, springs from history and perhaps also legend. Tupac Amaru was the last surviving member of the Inca royal family and was executed by the Spanish conquerors in Peru in 1571. Some 200 years later a Peruvian *mestizo* adopted the name Tupac Amaru II, to lead a nativist uprising against Spanish rule; he too was executed, and in an unbelievably barbaric way.

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In the early nineteenth century, rebellious elements in the distant region of Uruguay were dubbed "tupamaros" -- derisively by those in authority, with pride by those challenging it. The term was subsequently applied to a succession of outlaw and rebellious groups.

7. As perhaps with all revolutionary movements, it is difficult to separate the operative motives and objectives of the Tupamaros from the mountain of rhetoric by and about them. Most, perhaps nearly all, of them seem motivated by an intense nationalism and an idealistic belief in the efficacy of a revolutionary society. The main problem for these restless and idealistic youths is not one of jobs and security, but of real influence and significant accomplishment in a dull and static society. In any case, they profess that Uruguay as presently constituted offers little future to them as patriots or to the great bulk of the population. For the most part they are *action* rather than *program* oriented. In the glare of the publicity their tactical success has evoked, they have, over the past year or so, talked somewhat more freely of their post-revolutionary objectives. They would envisage a society much like Castro's Cuba, where the influence of the privileged and of selfish foreign interests is eliminated, and where the

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government is demonstrably on the side of the mass of the population and in support of the victims of imperialism the world over. While they admire Castro, it is worth noting that, except perhaps at the very beginning, they have neither sought nor much needed Cuban encouragement or assistance.

8. As we have indicated, one problem the present-day Tupamaros have faced as would-be liberators is that there are few unassimilated cultural groups in Uruguay and little of the grinding poverty that afflicts the swollen slums and benighted countryside of most other countries in South America. Indeed, nearly 90 percent of the population is of European descent; most are middle class in fact or in aspiration and rather conservative and complacent in outlook. By the standards of most countries, the quality of life is rather decent (e.g., per capita GNP, though smaller than a decade ago, is still over \$900; the rate of literacy is over 90 percent; the social-welfare system is quite extensive). Thus, while there definitely is a small, rather prosperous and influential ruling circle, it is difficult for most Uruguayans to look upon it as either an alien or exploitative class.

9. This does not mean that the Tupamaros are the only disgruntled people in Uruguay. Far from it. The country has

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suffered for more than a decade from acute and relentless economic problems that have led more than one observer to call it a "bankrupt welfare state." The sources of malaise are many: a sharp decline in prices for agricultural exports starting in the mid-1950s; inadequate investment in agriculture; low labor productivity and entrepreneurial competitiveness in the industrial sector; and the high, fixed costs of a swollen bureaucracy and of the extensive social-welfare programs. The symptoms are numerous and painful: stagnation or decline in investment, exports, production, and eventually in per capita consumption; acute inflation; and a growing shabbiness in everything from the appearance of public buildings to the style of life of the middle class.

10. From the point of view of the Tupamaros, this growing malaise and the resultant discontent, while a hopeful sign, were not likely to produce revolutionary changes in society, either through the ballot box or through labor strikes and mass demonstrations. Their rationale, copying Castro's example and Che Guevara's propaganda, was to *create* a revolutionary situation through a relentless campaign of violent action. Their goal was to polarize society and to sensitize the population to the point where revolution would become possible, if not

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inevitable. Drift and complacency, along with the prevailing *bourgeois* mentality, were literally to be shot out from under the populace. In time, military action would preclude any other form of political contention, and the well-organized and -led revolutionary forces would win. The Tupamaros were vague both as to timing and format for the final victory. They professed belief that the course of armed action would create not only a mass revolutionary movement but also a truly revolutionary moment; the strategy for taking power would become apparent only when the moment drew close.

11. The Tupamaros' choice of urban terrorism as a tactic was determined first and foremost by geography. There is little in the way of mountainous or otherwise inaccessible countryside in Uruguay, but the metropolitan area of Montevideo, which contains roughly one-half of the country's 2.9 million inhabitants, provides a myriad of streets and buildings which supply a bounty of vulnerable targets and invulnerable hide-outs. If the Tupamaros had any doubts on the matter when they started in 1963, the course of revolutionary warfare in Latin America over the next several years would have served to confirm their choice of battleground. Campaigns of guerrilla warfare in the countryside either failed or floundered

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-- most ignominiously with Guevara's personal effort in Bolivia, but also with attempts in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, and Venezuela. In time, urban terrorism became more prevalent, no doubt in part because of the frustration of rural campaigns, but perhaps in part as well in emulation of the successes of the Tupamaros. Among the noteworthy examples of following suit were Brazil and Argentina, the colossi to the north and south of tiny Uruguay.

12. In any case the Tupamaros spent several years after 1963 honing their techniques through sporadic attacks; these may have been mainly training exercises for new recruits, but they also served to capture funds, arms, and the headlines. Terrorist attacks became both bolder and more frequent starting in 1968. The Tupamaros over the next year or so acquired something of a Robin Hood reputation because of the light-heartedness of some of their capers, and because many of their exercises were intended to discredit the powerful and benefit the poor (e.g., the exposure of corruption; the distribution to working class districts of stolen foods).

13. The public tolerance of the Tupamaros -- probably a mixture of admiration and indifference -- was underscored by

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the growing unpopularity of the government of President Jorge Pacheco Areco. Pacheco, who was elevated from the vice-presidency following the death of the incumbent in December 1967, was determined to make a frontal assault against Uruguay's deep-seated economic problems. He adopted a stringent belt-tightening campaign to force the population to work harder while consuming less. While his program had considerable success in reducing inflation and reviving production, especially during 1969-1970, the end of Uruguay's economic ills and the demands for popular sacrifice came nowhere in sight. During this period, clashes with organized labor and their parliamentary champions led Pacheco to adopt a tougher and more authoritarian executive hand than the country had recently experienced. Pacheco's combativeness also produced a constant turnover of cabinet ministers, which gave the government an aura of disorder and drift.

14. At first the government and security forces tended to underestimate the importance and staying power of the Tupamaros. The very democratic and libertarian traditions of Uruguayan society served to the advantage of the insurgents. The security forces were poorly equipped and not

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much used to combat; they were far from the best or the boldest when it came to chance encounters with the terrorists or to the systematic work of intelligence and pursuit. The terrorists, in addition to being more highly motivated, had the advantage of choice of time and target. Their intelligence -- including penetrations in the governmental bureaus and commercial establishments that were their targets -- seemed excellent. In short, the picture for the general public for the most part was one of a rather feckless government versus a resolute and resourceful guerrilla force. These images -- with the initiative seemingly always with the Tupamaros -- probably contributed heavily to the rapid expansion in their ranks, especially during 1968-1969.

15. President Pacheco in time came to take the threat from the terrorists more seriously and decided upon a tough and unyielding line. This more or less coincided with the Tupamaros' decision to turn a much more ruthless face to the public. Late in 1969 the terrorists started gunning down policemen to intimidate the security forces and launched daring attacks meant to demoralize and destroy

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the effectiveness of the government generally. In July-August 1970 they kidnapped a total of five members of the diplomatic community: one escaped; three were in time released; but one victim, a police advisor from the United States, was assassinated. The last act was justified by the Tupamaros on the grounds that Pacheco refused to negotiate for the release of rebels held prisoner (and also that the victim was a US agent sent to teach the police methods of brutally repressing their organization).

Pacheco's line was that the Tupamaros were outlaws to be eradicated and not an important political force to be accommodated. He used the popular revulsion at the assassination and a growing public testiness about the terrorist campaign in general to demand several periods of emergency powers during which numbers of terrorists were captured. Also during 1970, officially-sponsored terrorist groups started operating against suspected Tupamaros and their sympathizers to even the odds somewhat. At one time some 250 suspected terrorists were in jail. But the slow and lenient course of Uruguayan justice and several jailbreaks -- including the escape of 111 prisoners in one caper in

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September 1971 -- undercut these government successes and again showed the Tupamaros to be a more or less indomitable force in terms of their chosen tactics.

16. The recently concluded national elections (November 1971) served as a testing point for the *strategy* of the revolutionaries. To what extent had their demonstrably effective terrorist tactics produced the political polarization that was essential to their revolutionary game plan? To what extent had the political system as well as the Pacheco administration become discredited in the eyes of the population?

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17. The leaders of the Tupamaros apparently split on the issue of how to react to the election. Some probably preferred to disrupt the electoral process and force Pacheco or the military to establish a dictatorship that would serve to discredit thoroughly the old political system. But others, whose views prevailed, decided to back conditionally the challenge of the *Frente Amplio* to the two traditional parties (known familiarly as the *Colorados* and the *Blancos*). The *Frente* -- a combination that included Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, and dissidents from the traditional parties -- adopted a political platform that called for far-reaching changes in society. While the Tupamaros endorsed and supported the *Frente* campaign, they stressed that violent revolution was the only course open to Uruguay. The *Frente*, they argued, could serve to mobilize additional popular support for the revolutionary forces in the country, but the oligarchy -- no matter what the election tallies -- would never hand power over to the people peacefully. The Tupamaros, in any case, did largely suspend their terrorist attacks during the pre-election period.

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18. As I write, some aspects of the election are still in doubt, including the winner of the presidential contest. Others are pretty clear: nearly 90 percent of the eligible voters participated, and more than 80 percent of those who went to the polls supported one or another representative of the traditional parties. Despite the dire straits of the economy, the growing shabbiness of life, the fecklessness of the security forces and the foibles of the political leadership, only 18 percent of the voters opted for the *Frente* and its calls for a dramatic political departure. Indeed, it seems most likely that after every ballot is counted and recounted a protégé of President Pacheco (Sr. Juan Maria Bordaberry) will take office as chief executive.*

19. Late in December 1971 the Tupamaros demonstrated that they retain their remarkable capacity for disruptive terror by pulling a series of successful raids (theft of two-way police

* *Uruguay is now going through the process of counting absentee and challenged ballots. With well over 100,000 votes yet to be counted, the conservative Bordaberry has about a 10,000 vote edge over a more enlightened and liberal runner-up.*

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radios and of the master plans for the Montevideo sewer system; destruction of a leading country club). Some members may become discouraged because the populace has rejected and discredited terrorism; some may defect to support the parliamentary activities of the *Frente* (which won a respectable number of seats in the legislature). Almost certainly, however, the campaign of terrorism will continue to be used by the revolutionaries to demonstrate their strength and at the same time the weakness of the government. The terrorists aside, the new administration will perhaps enjoy something of a honeymoon period -- both the professional politicians and the ordinary population are proud of the achievement of having held a democratic election. But the government will still have to contend with titanic economic problems and minuscule capacity for rolling them back dramatically. Almost certainly the use of counterterror, somewhat greater public cooperation, and improved performance by the security forces generally will prevent the Tupamaros from shooting their way to power. But only a loss of heart or a change of mind on the part of the revolutionaries would provide a return of domestic peace to Uruguay any-time soon.

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20. We still are faced with the issue of *Why Uruguay?*
Perhaps it would be useful to divide this into three separate,
if overlapping, questions.

A. Why a revolutionary insurgency? I would
start by saying -- because the place is Latin America
and the time is post-Castro. Nearly every Latin Ameri-
can country over the past decade has seen political
radicals turn to insurgency campaigns either in the be-
lief that they could change the course of their country's
history by somehow duplicating Castro's success against
Batista, or because they thought the effort itself
would provide gratification and rewards in the context
of the usually fratricidal politics among would-be revolu-
tionaries. I would concede the Tupamaros high marks
for idealism as these insurgency groups go. They found
Uruguay to be a run-down, humdrum welfare state, where
most of the people were either too complacent and
materialistic to realize society's limitations or too
timid to try for something better. As thoughtful and
ambitious youths, such a society was a bloody bore and
an intolerable offense to the revolutionaries. They

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were convinced that mankind should aspire to something more noble (the details did not matter), and that only a campaign of violence could shake the population out of its rut.

B. Why have the Tupamaros demonstrated staying power whereas most other Latin American insurgencies have folded or faded into the background? Here one can point to the special characteristics and problems of Uruguayan society: First those that served to discredit the administration and the status quo -- especially the economic malaise, the aimlessness of the political system, and the lack of opportunity for ambitious youths. Second, those which in other circumstances were the pride of the populace -- the rather permissive political system, an extremely libertarian judicial system, and an inexperienced and rather timid security force. In the general context of idealistic youth, the ranks of the terrorists grew in good part because the escapades of the terrorists were generally successful, and even failure meant no more than a tour in prisons run by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

C. But why have the Tupamaros proved so remarkably effective in sowing disruption? I would say a very important

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reason is the personal and group dynamics of the forces on both sides. The leaders of the Tupamaros apparently are exceptionally capable -- by general Latin American standards -- in maintaining unity and in projecting both a dynamic and largely positive image. They have avoided the personalistic and ideologic factionalism that has enervated movements elsewhere. They have also avoided the foreign ties which have tainted other insurgencies. And they have avoided -- with some exception -- offending the sensibilities of the population at large. Most people -- from admiration and tolerance as well as fear -- have accepted them as part of the Uruguayan political scene. President Pacheco and his key advisors, for their part, proved too rigid to steal the terrorists' thunder or otherwise isolate them politically, and too clumsy to beat them at their own game of force.

21. All other factors considered, does it take clever guerrillas and inept government? A Colombian guerrilla once lamented to a sympathetic reporter -- we needed a Batista but had a Lleras (referring to former President Lleras Restrepo). The Brazilian terrorists were by and large an effective group. But the military regime met

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violence with violence on the one hand, and won a measure of popular acceptance through its economic achievements and administrative integrity on the other. The government of Venezuela, within the context of a relatively democratic political system, isolated the very effective FALN through political and combat skills. In Bolivia, in contrast, the government and its security forces were far from effective, but the guerrillas under Guevara proved even less so for a variety of reasons.

22. I realize I say only what is obvious when I conclude that Uruguay has a first-class insurgency problem because it has first-class terrorists and second-rate government. But I believe this to be an essential element in the overall story.

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